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A Bid to Recapture the Sleight of Hand

By JON CARAMANICA

IN the end, it was the T-shirt that undid Agnès B., probably. You know the one. Basic white, with the company's cursive logo in the middle — simple enough to become a visual cliché, a faux-sophisticate brand reduced to a cheap graphic. It was the type of shirt you might see worn by the anonymous floor sweepers at any high-end salon, hoping to one day get a crack at the balayage brush.

At a certain point, a decade or so ago, one had to wonder exactly how slippery the slope from there to a Bebe T-shirt was, anyway.

That most people didn't notice was a testament to the success of the Agnès B. sleight of hand. The company specialized in, essentially, up-market basics with minor flourishes, one of them being an air of Gallic impossibility that made a white button-up shirt so much more than just a white button-up shirt.

After the brand peaked in the 1990s, its mantle was picked up by A.P.C. and, to some degree, Isabel Marant. Like Agnès B., both companies promise more than they deliver, if you're counting only the tangibles. The clothes are fine, the pose is better. But with the arrival of its third Manhattan store — more or less replacing the Greene Street shop that closed in 2009 — and some recent strokes of marketing wisdom, Agnès B. is taking another stab.

The newly opened SoHo location is billed as a "galerie boutique." On the walls hang art — some for sale, some from the private collection of Ms. B., nee Agnès Andrée Marguerite Troublé; some worthwhile, like the Louise Bourgeois sketches, some just colors on a canvas, like Ryan McGinness's multicolor graphic design blurts. Harmony Korine — Ms. Troublé has backed some of his films — has some bloblike orange figures painted on scraped-up black and white canvases that are more moving the longer you stare at them.

Agnès B. has a long history with street art, a link that once had an edge but is now de rigueur. As such, there is a line of predictable artist-collaboration T-shirts to commemorate the new store, but they're wisely tucked away at the center of this cavernous space, near a smart selection of art books, including a collection of Ryan McGinley's frolicking nudes.

The art hangs on every wall and, in only one real case, on a hanger. Near the rear of the store was a

black blazer with a noisy white and pink pattern that was part Aztec, part Space Invaders (\$645). It would have been the perfect wardrobe for an appearance on “TV Party.”

Mostly, though, there were basics: a chic-enough black and white plaid shirt (\$195) that would probably cost one-third as much at Uniqlo; handsome and slim royal blue trousers (\$245); and a pair of handsome and slim, and also practically translucent, white pants with thin blue pinstripes.

This isn't to say that Agnès B. takes no risks: mostly, they are in fabrics, and mostly, they are unpleasant. There was a men's toggle jacket made from burlap, or so it seemed, and not far away, a drapery white sweater that appeared to be crocheted (\$265). A short black men's rain trench had the feel of an old water slide. Some men's shirts (\$245) were made from the less pleasing of the Liberty fabrics (though at least one of the fabrics made for a great skinny tie).

The Liberty prints reappeared on the women's side of the store, in more appealing cuts, including a librarian-chic top with burgundy trimmed collar (\$225). That sat on a shelf near a host of nautical-striped tops and skirts in the Saint James style.

But here again, on the women's side, the fabrics got in the way. Women had a short trench of their own, in a slippery dégradé-ish print in various blue hues (\$645). And there was a not-wholly-unattractive pair of overall shorts in a pliable, slightly raspy linenlike fabric, in an olive plaid with purple accents. You half expected Angela Chase to come sulking in the door to reclaim them.

Most egregious was a lime knit cardigan — for men — perhaps best shipped to the outlets near Newton or Waltham, where younger grandmothers can slip it on over a white turtleneck when the wind starts kicking.

THE modest vision here is even more surprising given that less than a length of a soccer field away on Howard Street, up two flights of steps, is the Opening Ceremony annex, where you can still find several pieces from last year's whimsical Agnès B. pour Opening Ceremony collaboration. The slick navy-and-black-striped motorcycle jacket easily outclassed everything in the main Agnès B. shop, but so did the oddly cut snap-front cardigans, and even the mousy purple floral print top. Quel dommage.

Opening Ceremony even retooled the T-shirt, with the slogan “to b or not to b.”

If you've just moved to the city, or you want to pretend it's 1998, you can still get the classic white T-shirt (\$65) back at the main store, also available in gray, red, blue and yellow. And if you like shirts in those same colors, just around the corner on Canal Street, you can get them with a more durable logo: I ♥ NY — three for \$10.

Agnès B.

50 Howard Street (near Mercer Street); (212) 431-1335; usa.agnesb.com/en/

AIR FRANCE Agnès B. made the original fancy French basics, pawned off on thin American bodies that didn't know better. Globalization has rendered it more or less obsolete, but it's still trying.

SPIRIT A pair of fresh-faced and eager staff members working a floor the size of a sporting-goods store made the time pass pleasantly, but couldn't rescue the mood. Too many questionable fabric choices, too little innovation.

UNITED The store also houses a gallery, which will rotate every few weeks. Art and fashion, together at last. Just like everywhere else.

